

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

United States of America,

Plaintiff,

v.

Criminal Case No. 17-20824

Jamal Weems,

Defendant.

Sean F. Cox
United States District Court Judge

/

OPINION & ORDER
DENYING DEFENDANT'S MOTION FOR COMPASSIONATE RELEASE

In this criminal action, Defendant Jamal Weems (“Defendant”) was convicted of drug, firearms, and other offenses, and was sentenced to 66 months of imprisonment. The matter is before the Court on Defendant’s *pro se* Motion for Compassionate Release under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A), which is based upon concerns about the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic (“COVID-19”). The Court concludes that a hearing is not warranted and orders that the motion will be decided based upon the briefs. As explained below, the Court shall DENY the motion.

BACKGROUND

In this criminal case, Defendant pleaded guilty to Possession with Intent to Distribute a Controlled Substance, Cocaine Base, in violation of 21 U.S.C. § 841(a)(1); Possession with Intent to Distribute a Controlled Substance, Marijuana, in violation of 21 U.S.C. § 841(a)(1); Possessing a Firearm in Furtherance of a Drug Trafficking Crime, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 924(c); Tampering with Objects or Proceedings, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1512(c)(1); and Attempting to Obstruct an Official Proceeding, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1512(c)(2). This Court sentenced Defendant to a total of 66 months of imprisonment. (See 6/26/19 Judgment).

On January 12, 2021, Defendant filed his *pro se* Motion for Compassionate Release. (ECF No. 44).

Defendant is thirty years old. He is currently housed at FCI Oxford and has a projected release date of April 30, 2023. Defendant filed his Motion for Compassionate Release asserting that although he has already contracted COVID-19 and has recovered, he fears he could contract it again. (Def.'s Motion at 5). Defendant does not claim to have any health conditions that would place him at heightened risk for severe symptoms of COVID-19.

The Government acknowledges that Defendant has met the exhaustion requirement. The Government opposes the motion on the merits, noting that Defendant does not claim to have any health conditions that place him at increased risk and that Defendant has already contracted the virus and recovered. The Government contends the motion should be denied based upon a consideration of the § 3553(a) factors.

ANALYSIS

“The ‘compassionate release’ provision of 18 U.S.C. § 3582 allows district courts to reduce the sentences of incarcerated persons in ‘extraordinary and compelling’ circumstances. 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A).” *United States v. Michael Jones*, 980 F.3d 1098, 1100 (6th Cir. Nov. 20, 2020).

“The passage of the First Step Act in 2018 expanded access to compassionate release by allowing inmates to bring compassionate-release motions on their own behalf.” *United States v. Elias*, __ F.3d. __, 2021 WL 50169 at *1 (Jan. 6, 2021).

“An imprisoned person may file a motion for compassionate release after (1) exhausting the BOP’s administrative process; or (2) thirty days after the warden received the compassionate

release request – whichever is earlier.” *Jones, supra*, at 1106. Here, the Government acknowledges that Defendant has met the exhaustion requirement and, therefore, this Court may consider Defendant’s motion.

The United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit has held that sentence-modification decisions pursuant to § 3582(c)(1)(A) embody a three-step inquiry:

Before granting a compassionate-release motion, a district court must engage in a “three-step inquiry:” the court must “find” that “extraordinary and compelling reasons warrant [a sentence] reduction,” ensure “that such a reduction is consistent with applicable policy statements issued by the Sentencing Commission,” and “consider[] all relevant sentencing factors listed in 18 U.S.C. §3553(a).” *United States v. Jones*, 980 F.3d 1098, 1101 (6th Cir. 2020) (citing 18 U.S.C. §3582(c)(1)(A)). If each of those requirements are met, the district court “may reduce the term of imprisonment,” but need not do so. 18 U.S.C. §3582(c)(1)(A).

Elias, supra, at * 1.

At step one, a court must find whether “extraordinary and compelling reasons” warrant a sentence reduction. 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A)(I).

“At step two, a court must ‘find[]’ whether ‘such a reduction is consistent with *applicable* policy statements issued by the Sentencing Commission.’” *Jones, supra*, at 1108. (quoting 3582(c)(1)(A)) (emphasis added). But the Sixth Circuit has held “that § 1B1.13 is not an applicable policy statement for compassionate-release motions brought directly by inmates, and so district courts need not consider it when ruling on those motions.” *Elias, supra*, at *2. “And, in the absence of an applicable policy statement for inmate-filed compassionate-release motions, district courts have discretion to define ‘extraordinary and compelling’ on their own initiative.” *Id.* That means that, “[u]ntil the Sentencing Commission updates § 1B.13 to reflect the First Step Act, district courts have full discretion in the interim to determine whether an

‘extraordinary and compelling’ reason justifies compassionate release when an imprisoned person files a § 3582(c)(1)(A) motion.” *Jones, supra*, at 1109. Because Defendant’s compassionate release motion was filed by an incarcerated person, this Court “may skip step two of the § 3582(c)(1)(A) inquiry and ha[s] full discretion to define ‘extraordinary and compelling’ without consulting the policy statement in § 1B1.13.” *Jones, supra*.

“At step three, ‘§ 3582(c)[(1)(A)] instructs a court to consider any applicable § 3553(a) factors and determine whether, in its discretion, the reduction authorized by [steps one and two] is warranted in whole or in part under the particular circumstances of the case.’” *Jones, supra*, at 1109.

The Sixth Circuit has explained that, “in *granting* a compassionate-release motion, district courts must address all three steps.” *Elias, supra*, at *2 (emphasis added). But it has also clarified that “district courts may *deny* compassionate-release motions when any of the three prerequisites listed in § 3582(c)(1)(A) is lacking and do not need to address the others.” *Id.* (emphasis added).

Here, Defendant contends that his request for compassionate release should be granted because the ongoing pandemic constitutes extraordinary and compelling circumstances.

This Court agrees with other courts that have concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic alone does not justify compassionate release. *See, e.g., United States v. Shah*, No. 16-20457, 2020 WL 1934930, at *2 (E.D. Mich. April 22, 2020) (“[S]peculation as to whether COVID-19 will spread through Defendant’s detention facility ..., whether Defendant will contract COVID-19, and whether he will develop serious complications, does not justify the extreme remedy of compassionate release.”); *see also United States v. Raia*, 954 F.3d 594, 597 (3d Cir.

2020) (“[T]he mere existence of COVID-19 in society and the possibility that it may spread to a particular prison alone cannot independently justify compassionate release[.]”).

Here, Defendant does not claim to have any health conditions that place him at heightened risk of severe symptoms of COVID-19. Moreover, Defendant has already contracted the virus and has recovered. In light of that, this Court does not believe that Defendant has established extraordinary and compelling circumstances.

Moreover, this Court concludes that consideration of the § 3553(a) factors weighs against granting compassionate release in this particular case in any event. *United States v. Ruffin*, 978 F.3d 1000, 1008 (6th Cir. Oct. 26, 2020) (“Even when extraordinary and compelling reasons exist, the statute leaves district courts with discretion to deny relief under a balancing of the sentencing factors in 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a).”).

The nature and circumstances of Defendant’s offenses *weigh strongly* against his release. Defendant was involved in selling drugs and possessing firearms while doing so. These are very serious and troubling offenses.

And the conviction in this case is not an isolated event. Defendant has a lengthy criminal history. It includes prior convictions for drug offenses, and arrests for carjacking and breaking and entering.

This Court does not believe that releasing Defendant early would promote respect for the law, provide just punishment, afford adequate deterrence, or protect the public from further crimes of Defendant. In sum, this Court finds that Defendant is not an appropriate candidate for the extraordinary remedy of compassionate release.

CONCLUSION & ORDER

For the reasons set forth above, **IT IS ORDERED** that Defendant's Motion for Compassionate Release is **DENIED**.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Sean F. Cox

Sean F. Cox

United States District Judge

Dated: March 18, 2021